

TEXTS: Genesis 3:1-7; Matthew 4:1-11

The two-lettered temptation

I was not driven out into the wilderness when it happened to me. Nor was I 40 days' worth of famished – after all, I was only about 5 years old. My family lived on a small farm – some crops, but mostly an assortment of animals: chickens, ducks, a couple of cows, a million barn cats, and a retired camp pony named Shorty. Now even at 5, I had learned the rules about Shorty, rules that were in my best interest to follow. Do not climb on Shorty when he is tethered. Do not stand directly behind him. Do not cup your hand to feed him, but hold it out flat. Do not dart out or startle him. Now you've heard the rules, too. What was the first one? See – we don't forget rules. We choose to ignore them. Which is what I did that day, all because of one two-lettered word.

I'd seen those girls before. That day they were standing on the fence looking at Shorty who was out in the front pasture. They were much older – maybe 9 or even 10. They were worldly and wise. "Is that your pony?", they asked in a tone that made me feel even smaller than I was. "Yeah, that's my pony". "Yeah, well if it is, then what's his name?" "Shorty". "Well, if he's yours, can you ride him?" "I can ride him". "Let's see ya." Now I hadn't forgotten the rule – Do not climb on Shorty when he's tethered. But now that rule was getting in the way of something else – my ego. "I can't right now", I tried. And then they said it – "If it was really your pony, you could." My next memory is the feel of my parents' bedspread and the taste of baby aspirin.

What happened? What happened physically was that Shorty bucked me off. What happened spiritually was that I met temptation, and it got the best of me. But the temptation wasn't the pony. It wasn't even those big bad girls. The temptation came in one very small word, with two very small letters – if. “If it was really your pony, you could ride it.” I let “if” take hold and do its damage. “If it is my pony, I should be able to ride it”. “If it is my pony, here’s what I have to do to prove it”. “If it is my pony, Shorty will take care of me.” If, if, if. With one two-letter word, the rule and the reason for it took a back seat to my need to prove something.

The good news is that I can now resist the temptation to climb on a tethered pony. But “if” comes in many forms and situations. And it follows us all throughout our journeys, and we fall prey to it over and over again. Each year, as our Lenten journey begins, we are called to take heart in knowing that even Jesus was tempted as we are. And we are called to find our strength in knowing how he resisted the power of the “if”.

I’ve always felt that Matthew 4:2 is one of the greatest understatements in the Bible. “He fasted 40 days and 40 nights, and afterwards he was famished.” No kidding. And it was in his hunger, his need, his vulnerability, that the tempter came. No surprise there. We know that’s when temptation comes – when we are weak, when we are feeling insecure or vulnerable, when we are needing attention, or immediate gratification, or a sense of belonging. And we recognize the way the temptation came – with that one, small, two-lettered word – if.

If. A tiny word, like a tiny seed – a seed of doubt that can germinate and grow inside of us, causing us to question, to doubt, to be put on the defensive, trying to prove what can only be accepted in faith.

“If you are the Son of God (seed of doubt planted, dare to prove it made), command these stones to become loaves of bread”. Jesus was 40 days’ worth of hungry, and the tempter knew it. Jesus could certainly do it – water into wine, stones into bread. No one would see it way out there in the wilderness. And bread doesn’t hurt anyone – in fact, he could use it to feed other hungry people. And, after all, Jesus would need to keep his strength up for all that healing and helping ahead of him. You see, we know how to do this – we know the rationalizations. All too well. That “if” temptation, for Jesus and for us, is about using power to meet our own needs, rather than rely on God’s promise and God’s power for us. It is to take matters into our own hands, betraying our lack of trust in God’s providence and care. It is to fear the hunger, the emptiness, the need so much that we are willing to fill ourselves at any cost. Trusting and valuing his relationship with God above all else, and finding strength from God’s Word, Jesus looked that “if “ in the eye and said “NO”.

From the top of the temple, Jesus heard “If you are the Son of God (seed planted, dare to prove it made), throw yourself down”. The tempter came back with Jesus’ own strategy now turned against him – scripture. Quoting Psalm 91, the tempter dares Jesus to prove its truth. “The angels will swoop down and catch you – if you’re the Son of God, that is – so show me”.

This is the familiar temptation to use power to point to oneself. What a spectacle it would have been – that divine demonstration in front of an audience! What a witness to the gospel, what a start to his ministry! Think what he could have done with that kind of enthusiasm – no doubting Thomases, no resistant Pharisees to contend with. He could win them over with a single leap! Scripture said so, right? We know the rationalizations, we know about making the end justify the means. We know about finding Scripture to speak for what we

want. We know it because we do it. We give in to the “if”. “If you are Christian, “If you know God will love you, forgive you, take care of you no matter what you do...” We know the pressure, from out there, and from in here, to do something to get attention, to be noticed, to seem special, to fit in. Do something really amazing and be sure you get the credit. Do something really reckless and then claim God’s amazing forgiveness. And the “if “ gets the upper hand. Because we have chosen to forget that it is not about us.

Lastly, Jesus is shown all the kingdoms of the world, and hears “all this will be yours IF you will worship me”. We are lured by this temptation at every turn in this wilderness of a world today. To choose to do what it takes to find security in the things of this world. It’s the voice that tells us that more is better, that warns us to reign in how much we give, that want us to put ourselves first, that whispers in our ear about a successful life as one full of valuable things. All this can be yours IF you are willing to let it cost your integrity, your faithful values, your relationship with others, and most importantly your relationship with Almighty God.

“If”. It is the way Jesus was tempted, and it is the way we are all tempted. When “if” hits your ears, and knocks on the door of your will, draw on the strength of the One who stood firm. Trust and value your relationship with God above all things. For IF you will, you’ll be able to find a two-letter word of your own – NO.